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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 002305

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: SENIOR FRENCH OFFICIALS DISCUSS LEBANON NEXT STEPS
WITH NEA DAS CARPENTER

REF: A. BEIRUT 1106

[B](#). PARIS 2263

[C](#). PARIS 2243

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.5 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment: Presidential Middle East Advisor Dominique Boche stressed strong French support for holding Lebanon's elections on time and expressed concern over Syrian/loyalist delay tactics during discussions with visiting NEA DAS Carpenter April 5. The MFA issued a tough statement April 5 reaffirming that elections must take place in May, cautioning against an election delay, and calling for formation of a new government. Boche voiced pessimism on Syrian intentions, concluding that Damascus was seeking a good report from Larsen on its troop withdrawal while it would continue to manipulate Lebanon from outside and seek to delay elections until September or October, at which point it would seek to regain control. Boche assailed the GOL decision to revise the draft electoral law towards bigger constituencies as a direct blow to the Maronite Patriarch. Boche expressed hope that the opposition could secure Hizballah's support for holding elections, describing this as perhaps the only way to overcome Syrian/loyalist delay tactics. Boche agreed with Carpenter that UNSYG Rep Larsen should continue to press on elections and agreed that UNSCR 1559's call for free and fair elections provides him a continuing mandate. He reported that Larsen will be received in Paris April 6. On potential assistance to a post-elections GOL, Boche cautioned against applying an Iraq-style reconstruction model but conceded that some type of international donor conference was likely. Carpenter heard a different and less helpful emphasis from MFA A/S-equivalent for NEA Thibault, who questioned the legal basis for insisting that elections take place on time and described elections as not being an element of UNSCR 1559. Thibault also suggested that once Syria had withdrawn from Lebanon, the U.S. and France would be under pressure to recognize the Syrian gesture. The disconnect between Boche's firm resolve and Thibault's caution is typical of the nuance we have long observed between the Elysee and MFA on the Syria/Lebanon dossier, which remains firmly in Elysee control. End summary and comment.

[1](#)2. (C) NEA DAS Scott Carpenter visited Paris April 5 and met separately with MFA A/S-equivalent for North Africa/Middle East Jean-Francois Thibault and Presidential Middle East Advisor Dominique Boche. Carpenter briefed Boche and Thibault on his just completed five-day visit to Beirut, during which he met with the full spectrum of opposition leaders and found them more united than before. The opposition had the momentum of the Lebanese street behind them, was showing new flexibility on government formation, and delivering a clear message on the need for elections by the end of May. The opposition strategy on the electoral law was to debate the recently revised draft electoral law in Parliament and press Speaker Nabih Berri to call for a vote; if the revised law did not pass, the opposition would accept elections on the basis of the electoral law from the 2000 election. Carpenter confirmed that the opposition was confident that it could win under either electoral law, the revised or year 2000 version. Carpenter stressed that elections remained the opposition's overriding concern, and they wanted high-level statements from the U.S., France and others, to make clear that elections must take place by the end of May. The U.S. believed that we could not waver in insisting on elections by May.

ELYSEE SUPPORT FOR ELECTIONS ON TIME, CONCERNS ON SYRIAN
INTENTIONS

[1](#)3. (C) Presidential Middle East Advisor Dominique Boche responded enthusiastically to Carpenter's presentation, and affirmed that the GoF, like the U.S., was pressing hard for holding elections on time. He cited an MFA statement issued earlier that day which reiterated that elections must take place in May, that a delay in the electoral process would run contrary to the will of the Lebanese people, and that Lebanese political forces should find the means to form a government, for which the first task would be launching the electoral process. The MFA statement also condemned the recent series of attacks in Lebanon and called for punishment

of the perpetrators.

14. (C) Boche reiterated that the GoF was not very optimistic on the current situation in Lebanon, specifically Syrian intentions and prospects for an elections delay. He described the Syrians and loyalists as "trying to manipulate us" and seeking to postpone Lebanon's elections until September or October, at which point they anticipated less international scrutiny and greater factional divisions within Lebanon, which they could exploit to show that Lebanon could not live alone without Syrian control. Boche observed that Syria appeared focused on overcoming the immediate obstacle of Larsen's April report, and that it would seek to get its troops out in time to receive a good report. After the troop withdrawal, he anticipated that the SARG would continue to cause problems and manipulate Lebanon from the outside, while postponing formation of a government and elections towards creation of a new situation in September or October, at which point Syria would seek to regain control of Lebanon. Boche also cited Syrian efforts to agitate Palestinian camps in Lebanon, which he described as a longtime zone of Syrian control and beyond the reach of PA President Mahmoud Abbas or other outside moderating influences.

15. (C) Boche described the GoF as very upset by the GOL decision to further revise the election law and move towards bigger constituencies, which he described as a direct blow to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. Carpenter pointed out that the opposition's pragmatic flexibility on the election law removed a potential factor delaying the election. Boche expressed hope that the opposition could convince Hizballah to engage on the election, which he viewed as perhaps the only way to overcome SARG/loyalist delay tactics. Although the U.S. and France needed to keep pushing for elections on time, Boche said he did not believe we have the ability to impose deadline. Boche agreed with Carpenter's assessment that Hizballah had been destabilized a bit by the March 14 opposition demonstration, and that Nasrallah realized he had made mistake by adopting an excessively pro-Syrian stance during the March 8 Hizballah gathering. In Boche's view, Hizballah now faced a dilemma in how to maintain its political standing without Syria's presence, and it might be tempted to work in the same direction with the opposition on the elections. Carpenter observed that Jumblatt was already pursuing such a strategy in seeking to reach out to Hizballah, much to the loyalists' chagrin.

16. (C) Carpenter raised his April 4 meeting in Beirut with UNSYG Special Envoy Larsen, noting Larsen had told him that his mission would be to push for elections on time. Carpenter observed to Boche that MFA North/Africa Director Thibault (see paras 8-9 below), in an earlier discussion that day, had questioned whether elections were part of UNSCR 1559 or Larsen's mandate. Carpenter reiterated the USG view that UNSCR 1559 did provide a basis for insisting on free and fair elections, a point with which Boche fully concurred. Boche explained Thibault's caution by noting that Larsen had come under attack from Algeria and others for exceeding his mandate, and that Larsen therefore needed to be careful and prepared to face criticism of going beyond UNSCR 1559. Boche cited difficult, ongoing UNSC discussions on the draft UNSCR on the commission of inquiry, and the numerous proposed amendments, as an example of the obstacles we faced in maintaining international pressure on the GOL and SARG. Boche agreed with Carpenter that such criticism of Larsen or accusations of interference were no reason for the U.S. or France to stop pushing on the elections issue.

17. (C) Before closing the discussion, Boche expressed interest in U.S. thinking on the "day after" Syrian withdrawal and successful elections in Lebanon. Carpenter confirmed that European Commission Deputy Director Christian Leffler had invited NEA PDAS Liz Cheney to Brussels to discuss a post-election action plan and potential package of ideas for the new government, should it be in place. Boche, revisiting points made last week to visiting NEA Ambassador Satterfield (ref c), stressed that we should not seek to apply an Iraq-style reconstruction model in Lebanon, stressing Lebanon's strong democratic tradition and the need to wait for the new Lebanese government to request what it needs. Boche conceded that some type of international conference, at Lebanese request, was likely to take place after elections, but again rejected the idea of any type of "international supervision," in the Iraq model. Carpenter reassured Boche that no one in the USG was anticipating an Iraq-style intervention in Lebanon. While it was important to let a new Lebanese government articulate its needs, there was a useful purpose in seeking to anticipate and plan for what these needs might be. Carpenter also conceded that perhaps more planning was needed for the contingency that elections did not take place.

THIBAULT: 1559 DOES NOT ADDRESS ELECTIONS

18. (C) In response to Carpenter's emphasis on elections,

Thibault stressed caution on Lebanon's current political situation, which he viewed as "very dangerous" due to Syrian and loyalist election delay tactics, coupled with efforts to sow fear and uncertainty via terrorist acts. Thibault asserted that once the Syrian withdrawal was complete, UNSCR 1559 would have essentially achieved most of what was feasible; disarming Hizballah or the Palestinian camps was another issue, which was impossible to implement now. In Thibault's view, this was why the draft UNSCR on the international commission of inquiry was so important, since it would give the international community cover to maintain pressure and focus on Lebanese authorities even after a Syrian withdrawal. Thibault added that we should seek to avoid a situation in which France and the U.S. were accused of internal interference in Lebanon, especially among Arab governments who were less supportive of 1559. Carpenter, for his part, stressed that elections were paramount, within the framework of 1559, and that it was in the essential interest of the Lebanese people and the international community that these elections take place on time.

19. (C) Carpenter also raised with Thibault his April 4 meeting with Larsen, and expressed concern that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad was looking for a reward for Syrian withdrawal. With elections still up in the air, the international commission of inquiry yet to deploy and no accountability yet for Hariri's assassination, it was much too early for any carrots for Syria, withdrawal or not. Thibault responded, somewhat unhelpfully, that if the Syrians did fully withdraw, there would be enormous pressure on the U.S. and France to recognize the change. Carpenter responded that there remained pressing issues beyond the withdrawal, namely the elections and the international investigations. Thibault backed down a bit, but explained that the GoF was most comfortable when it had an international framework in which to act; UNSCR 1559 gave it that framework in the context of withdrawal, but, in Thibault's view, it did not address the parliamentary elections. Thibault also voiced concern over internal weaknesses within Lebanon, including factionalization and the long tradition of its political class in extracting political and economic benefits from Syrian domination. He summed up that our joint efforts on Lebanon had worked "remarkably" up to now thanks to the extraordinary level of U.S.-French cooperation. The situation now, however, was becoming more complex with Syrian withdrawal, and we had a looser UN framework in which to operate.

10. (C) On potential post-election international assistance to Lebanon, Thibault asserted that assisting the army would be a key issue. The GoF had in place a modest bilateral assistance program to the Lebanese army, which could be expanded. Thibault stressed the need to avoid too much of an "imported mechanism" in assisting the Lebanese army, and said we should look to fellow Arab governments first. He counseled looking at the Lebanese army with a sense of realism, and accepting that it would not be a major military power, but would need to be capable of keeping order and curbing factionalism.

11. (C) Comment: Though neither Boche nor Thibault was optimistic about Lebanon's current situation or Syrian delay tactics, we were struck by their differing messages on the elections issue, with Thibault appearing out of step with GoF policy and his own minister, who in a meeting that same day with our Ambassador, stressed the urgent need for elections on schedule (ref b). We view the Thibault-Boche disconnect as symptomatic of the longstanding nuance we have observed between the working-level MFA and Elysee on Syria/Lebanon, with the MFA typically counseling caution and pointing out the worst-case scenarios, while the Elysee stresses resolve in pressing forward. Fortunately for us and for Lebanon, the policy lead on this issue remains firmly in the hands of the Elysee. End comment.

LEACH